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ABSTRACT

Pupils can learn to write more effectively if they go through the cycle of prewriting, writing, and rewriting practiced by the publishing author. The writing class should not be hampered through studying writing backward, from the process of reading, or paragraphs, the student can begin to find his subject, select his becoming information, choose his vehicle of expression, identify the audience, be and develop a feeling for the appropriate structure, tone, and point of view. To pass from prewriting to writing, the difficult first draft can be accomplished through setting deadlines and disregarding grammar, spelling, and other stylistic niceties. Rewriting involves evaluating the work for large problems, such as organization and subject limitation, and later considering the individual units from word through paragraph. In order to teach the cycle of writing most effectively, the teacher must also practice it and share his failures, successes, and solutions with his students. (LH)

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Your Elementary Pupil and the Writer's Cycle of Craft

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The publishing writer — novelist, scientist, historian, journalist, scholar, adman, poet — passes through an identifiable cycle of craft, a ritual of process which has significant implications for the elementary language arts program. Quite simply, your pupils can learn to write much more effectively if they are led to experience the writer's cycle of craft.

This does not mean you are training professional writers in your classroom. Few of your students, if any, will make the best-seller list, but then few of the boys in your class will play for the New York Giants, yet they learn by emulating the most experienced players in the world. The pupil may also learn the skill of writing as well as tackling if he follows the example of the pros.

It may seem arrogant, or even impossible, to tell language arts teachers that the mysteries of published writers can be laid bare. And, indeed the myth of art is real — there is something unexplainable in the skill of a Milton or a Mailer, a Lowell or a Train. Nevertheless, master writers are craftsmen before they are artists. They don't bypass craft, they pass through it to a new dimension. On the level of craft, we can understand and perhaps emulate the way they perform in the making of their writing.

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The writing process can be studied. There is an extensive bibliography of books on writing from the writer's point of view in my book, *A Writer Teaches Writing*. Students of writing have a vast resource of writers' journals, letters, autobiographies and manuscript pages which document how writers write.

Yet, despite such evidence, we rarely build our language arts curriculum on what most expert writers have had to learn and practice. The writing program is often created backwards, from the process of reading or from what we discover by examining

language which has already been written. These neat, well-intentioned programs often have little to do with the actual process — or practice — of writing.

There is another impolitic, painful fact which must be mentioned: the most conscientious and traditional teacher may be the worst writing teacher. The teacher who sees himself teaching in the most conventional way — telling his pupils exactly what to do, giving precise assignments, meticulously correcting each paper — may actually prevent his students from learning to write.

The model for the writing course is the workshop in which the teacher is not a spouting fountain of wisdom but an editor who evaluates what each writer has done, and tries to help the individual improve his own work in his own way. This model is practical, for a teacher can create a classroom environment in which his pupils will — eventually — want to write and — eventually — want to offer their writing to the teacher who has earned the pupil's respect as his most understanding and knowledgeable reader. But the pupil will not want or need a reader until he has entered into the writer's cycle of craft.

Prewriting

In most classrooms we demand that our pupils sit down and write, immediately, right now, on a topic we have chosen, in a form we dictate. I have been a newspaper rewrite man, and yet I could not perform many of the assignments I have seen suddenly shot at third and fourth-graders. It is as if we ordered, "Eat. Then cook."

The publishing writer usually spends far more of his time prewriting than he does writing — and the more experienced he becomes the better prepared he is likely to be when he sits down at his writing table.

What is prewriting? It is everything the writer does before he completes his first draft. In one sense, it is perception — everything the writer has been and learned and felt before the moment of commitment to the page. The pupil must come to his writing

the same way — his own experience, his own knowledge, his own intelligence, his own emotion, his own judgment, his own voice mobilized for the page. He does this by passing through the stage of craft we call prewriting.

Prewriting is not a simple one-two-three process. The elements of prewriting change in emphasis and in order, but before the professional writer completes his first draft he has attempted to find a subject, to summon the information which will support his subject and to choose the vehicle which will carry it to his reader. He has identified his audience; developed a feeling for the appropriate structure and tone and point of view.

Is all this beyond the elementary pupil? Of course — in the beginning. In the beginning it was beyond the gray-haired, fat professional writer. He had to learn it, and the elementary pupil can also learn much of the prewriting process.

My wife has noticed one trait common to most writers she has seen in our home. It is a special kind of awareness expressed more specifically, more concretely than the awareness exhibited by most other people. The young pupil can be encouraged in the very beginning of his education to use his senses to become more aware of his world. His awareness can be stimulated through games and exercises which show him the fun of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching his world firsthand, and he can also be shown how words stimulate his senses to make him more aware.

At first the beginning pupil merely collects raw specifics. Later he gathers them into bunches. Eventually he uses them to form the backbone of a paragraph. Gradually, he begins to discover the logic inherent in his specifics, and he discovers which specifics and which order of specifics will communicate to his audience. He is, indeed, learning to think, and he is having fun doing it, for he is able to use that marvelous toy of man, language, to both discover and communicate his thoughts.

This all takes time. For the professional writer it can take a lifetime, since writing is never learned, it is practiced. The student, like the writer, continues to develop the skills of expression as he himself develops. There is time, however, in the average school

year if the teacher realizes that writing must be based on a solid foundation of seeing and if the pupil is led repeatedly through the entire cycle of craft at a reasonable pace, a step at a time, so that he spirals up through the curriculum, each time honing his basic skills in slightly more difficult tasks. And he need never be bored, for he is practicing the same old skills on new subjects.

Writing

At last the writer passes from prewriting to writing. But this passage is never easy. To understand the terror many an elementary school pupil feels towards the blank page, we must recognize that most publishing writers never escape that same terror. Before the first draft everything is possible but as soon as the pages are filled, the writer — his ignorance, his style, his very nature — is exposed.

Many writers get over this block by producing a draft at a sitting, writing as quickly as they can. There is another good reason to write fast, for when the words run freely, the way a line runs after a fish bites, the writer may catch an idea or a tone he didn't expect. The writer doesn't worry about syntax or spelling or penmanship, and neither should the student. There's time for that later. Now is the time for discovery. The writer wants to see if he has landed an idea, to discover exactly what his words reveal on the page. He is, at this stage, writing for himself, listening to the story with the excitement he hopes he will, with craft, be able to recreate for the reader.

As teachers we must encourage our pupils, especially the young, to write without any fear beyond the natural terror of the page. The pupil must be able to write until he has created something strong enough to stand up to criticism.

The device writers usually grab to pull themselves from the prewriting stage through the first draft is the artificial stimulus of the deadline. He, or his editor, makes an arbitrary date, and when the writer can no longer put off the writing, the writing gets done. (This article was completed only three days late.) A writing course must have regular, consistent deadlines: on particular days, at a

certain hour, a minimum amount of writing will be passed in. The student may be allowed to choose his own work habits, his own way of meeting the deadline, but the deadline must be met.

We make a mistake in school, however, when we confuse the draft deadline with the final copy deadline. Each draft is a trial run. On early drafts the writer should not worry about mistakes, instead it is a time to make mistakes. Creativity is the residue of many courageous mistakes.

A draft is an experiment to see if this piece of writing can be done, to see if this subject can be completed and documented, to see if this form will work, to see if this audience can be reached in this way. These are the reasons that the writer feels that the completion of a working draft — one that stands up to his own critical eye — is, in a sense, not the end but the beginning of the writing process. It is the most essential step in the cycle of craft, and it may be the shortest one. Yet the conventional writing course is designed as if this central stage in the cycle of craft was the only stage, and students are graded and permanently judged on their first draft.

Rewriting

When the draft is complete the writer goes to work, not in a spirit of punishment as if he had failed, but in a spirit of making. First, he usually rereads his entire piece, looking for the large failures of subject and structure. More often than not he decides he has to limit or re-aim his subject. Quite often he has to reorganize the entire piece. Sometimes he has to change the form. I had a magazine article grow into a novel and a short story compress into a poem. The writer may have to go back through the stages of prewriting and writing, once again or many times again. This is the way it is, and what's more, it's fun. Not the fun of the easy, but the fun of the hard, the satisfaction of making with your eye, your hand, your brain something you hadn't made before.

After the larger problems of rewriting are solved, then the writer attacks his own copy, word by word, phrase by phrase, sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph. He feels the ultimate satis-

factions of the craftsman as he fits and polishes and shapes his language.

Again, this can be a chore or it can be a game. The elementary student can discover the fun of seeing meaning change as words change, or a joke evolving or an emotion being trapped or an idea coming clear. Language can be a precision tool with an edge sharp, clean, and dangerous. It takes years for the pupil to learn to use language well. But the skill can be learned with patience and practice in an environment which accepts the fact that failure is an essential part of learning, and that there never can be an absolute standard of what is right and wrong.

There are no absolutes to the teaching of writing either. Even in a writing program emphasizing rewriting, no revision may be necessary. If the draft stands the writer's and the readers' scrutiny, so be it. Not everyone has to rewrite every time. But most writers have to rewrite much of the time, and the pupil must appreciate that. Rewriting in the writer's brain or on the writer's page is the way writers usually discover what they mean and how they can communicate what they mean.

The writing class is a workshop in which each student shares through small group and class publishing individual problems and individual solutions. The pupil slowly begins to understand the possibilities of craft as he sees his classmates' papers evolve.

Each writer — pupil and professional — searches for his own subject and tries to make something of it, finding his own view of the world and his own voice, the step forward that can give him self-respect. The cycle of craft turns on itself. Final draft becomes beginning, editing reveals a new point of view, a word thought of before a single sentence is written crystallizes the entire piece. At last the writer has a draft which is done as well as he can do it. In the same way each pupil should choose his own best work for the final evaluation of a grade. There is no escape for either writer or pupil. There is a final evaluation, but it comes when each chooses his own best version for judgment.

The Writing Teacher Writes

If the Language Arts teacher is courageous enough he can take his students along with him on the adventure of writing. He will find a new role as a teacher, and his students will begin to learn a new ability to write.

Does this mean that the writing teacher must be a professional writer? Of course not. It does mean, however, that he should be able to perform to the level of his average student; it does mean that he should share with his students the excitement of using language to discover his world.

It is ironic that such a curriculum of student and teacher sharing their writing problems is considered radical. For it really is quite obvious — and a good many teachers are already trained to teach in this new way — if they could realize their honest reactions to writing were nothing to be ashamed of.

At the week-long workshop in the teaching of writing which I conduct for the New England School Development Council at Bowdoin College each summer, I make the teachers write, and when I do they become pupils. They are surprised when they suffer the agonies of their students and even more surprised when I tell them they suffer the agonies of the writer. At Bowdoin the teachers are embarrassed that they have to take a good deal of time to discover their subject, that they try to avoid writing and, therefore, revealing themselves, that once their draft is done they have to go over it time and again. In other words, they instinctively follow the writer's cycle of craft, the same process they had to follow in writing papers for their most demanding college professors. But they think this method is a failure on their part, and so they deny this essential process to their students.

Learning to write should never be a passive affair. It is a matter of action, of doing. It is an intellectual game the teacher can play with his pupils, sharing their problems and their solutions by revealing their work to each other and examining it together.

Try it. It is, of course, frightening, even terrifying for a 39-year-old teacher to show his writing to a 10-year-old; almost as frightening as a 10-year-old showing his writing to a 39-year-old. But once these two writers, young and old, begin to share their problems they may begin to share solutions. They may explore together the writer's exciting cycle of craft.